

OTHER OPINION

Set A Date To End Occupation Of Iraq

On June 28, power in Iraq was officially handed over by the U.S. civilian authority to the Iraqis, yet more than 138,000 American troops remain there. Although the symbolic transfer of power has come and gone, we still face great challenges.

JOHN B. LARSON

To meet these challenges, Congress and the Bush administration must set a time certain to end our occupation and level with the American people and our service members about the cost of the war and the length of troop deployments.

With the pending election of a national assembly and the adoption of a constitution in Iraq, the United States must end its military deployment beginning in March 2005, with an end to occupation by December of that year.

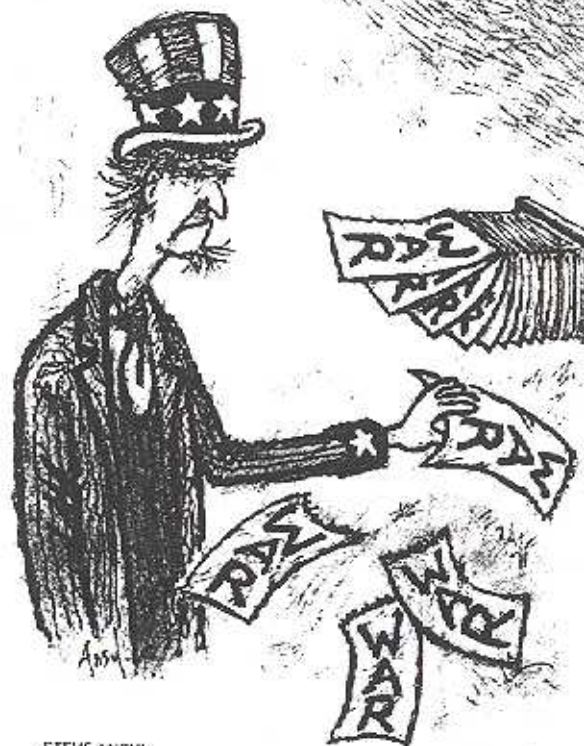
March 2005 will mark two years since the United States began military operations there. December coincides with the timeline contained in U.N. resolutions and is also the date when a new Iraqi government will take power. This is a reasonable time frame to provide intense training of Iraqi security forces and rotate our troops out, allowing a coalition of international troops to take

over.

As policy-makers, we owe our troops and citizens a hard look in the mirror. Americans want to win; it's hard to admit mistakes, let alone failures. The greatest failure, however, would be the denial of reality and unwillingness to face the truth. When it comes to Iraq, the hard truth is we fought a war of choice, the unintended consequences of which leave no easy alternatives and make our occupation an exasperating reality.

The haunting image this nation need not repeat in Iraq is that of the crowded helicopters leaving the rooftop of our embassy in Saigon in 1975. Planning a set time for our departure is neither a signal of retreat nor a matter of cutting and running, but of facing the reality of our situation and planning strategically.

In Iraq, we are immersed in a nation full of its own cultural and tribal hatreds, nationalistic political factions and religious zealotry more than 2,000 years in the making.



STEVE ANSUL

Iraqis should want to form a Democratic government as much as we want it for them. Democracy cannot be achieved

itarian aid.

Congress needs to ensure that U.S. policy is directed at the root causes of

at the point of a bayonet, and the Iraqi government and people must want us to be there as much as we want to be there for them.

It became clear in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq that the administration lacked a comprehensive strategy to secure the peace. This was compounded by a strategy that was predicated on overly optimistic assumptions, misinformation, poor intelligence and outright lies from Iraqi exile leader Ahmad Chalabi.

It's time for us to exhibit some tough love to our allies — those who know they must step up as we step back for their sake as well as ours. At the same time, there needs to be a renewed effort to focus on Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida — the terrorists responsible for the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

The war on terror is fought on many fronts — not only with weapons and troops, but with diplomacy and human-

terrorism: the hunger, poverty, desperation and chaos that lead to fanaticism.

This is why I am encouraging Congress to propose a summit of world religious leaders, along with the leaders of the United Nations, the Arab League and academics, for a forthright discussion on the pervasive nature of hate and terrorism. The world needs to reach beyond its political institutions and turn to its great religious teachings, the rule of law and academic leaders to seek their collective wisdom in an effort to end the plague of terrorism.

Finally, achieving these goals will be near impossible without first gaining our energy independence. This means investment in energy infrastructure and the research and development of hydrogen and other alternative fuels.

In the wake of the hand-over, the administration and Congress must level with our troops and the American people about this path forward from Iraq — a path that must restore a measure of respect for America and its credibility at home and abroad.

John B. Larson of East Hartford is Democratic U.S. representative from the 1st District.